

Wizarding in the Classroom: Teaching Harry Potter and Politics

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ABSTRACT This article describes teaching a course called Harry Potter and Politics. Focusing on aspects of political culture, the class tackled themes of identity, institutional behavior, and globalization. Teaching Harry Potter has several benefits. Students are both familiar with the wizarding world and yet have enough distance to examine it dispassionately. The book is driven by ethnic conflict, political power struggles, and dysfunctional bureaucracies. Finally, there is an academic literature on the books. Beyond Harry Potter, teaching politics through popular culture is not only natural for addressing political culture, but taps into the ways undergraduates are increasingly experiencing politics.

WHY HARRY POTTER

Often I have found it challenging to teach students to truly see different sides of contentious issues, appreciate how political science insights can illuminate many aspects of the world around us, and really delve into issues of political culture and the power of identity. The basic problem has been twofold. If the students are studying their own societies and examples with which they are very familiar, they bring to the analysis their own biases, including which positions are right, which issues are uninteresting, and which narratives predominate. If they are studying societies or issues with which they are unfamiliar, trying to master the details often overwhelms them, leaving little time for them to analyze the situation or apply political science theories with any nuance. I tried to imagine a society that students both know intimately and yet have enough distance that they could examine it dispassionately. For many current undergraduates, the world of Harry Potter fits this bill.

Fiction and film in the classroom is no longer unusual for political science courses (Whitebrook 1993; Zuckert 1995). Like my colleagues, I have used it frequently to show students worlds that they have not or cannot experience, such as life under communism or in Brazilian *favelas*; historical events, like the Holocaust and the Battle of Algiers; or how issues like globalization or ethnic conflict play out at the micro level. Beyond bringing the material to life or illustrating how specific political theories operate, I also use these works to show how political theories can raise multiple readings of a text. Finally, as Nafisi (2003) writes in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, “A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice; in this way a novel is called democratic—not that it

advocates democracy but that by nature it is so” (132). This ability to see characters enmeshed in social systems and their multiple selves on full display can create much more complex readings of politics than strict rational-actor models (Fliter 2008).

The other value of teaching novels and films is that these works themselves are embedded in political and economic contexts. This is may be clearer in science fiction, where the social commentary is often prominent, or works based on historical events. However, even Hollywood blockbusters reflect American perspectives on complex power relationships, tensions over communal identity, issues of responsibility, and institutional behavior. And this embeddedness is not just reflected in plots and characters, but also in the production and distribution of the work. I find training students to see the structures and values encoded inside the works of popular culture and in the works as commodity as valuable as anything I teach.

The Harry Potter series brings with it many advantages for accomplishing these myriad teaching goals. Because it was a global phenomenon, large numbers of students have already read it, including many international students. Through its seven books, it creates a well-developed parallel world. Furthermore, the entire plot is driven by ethnic tensions, questions about social responsibility, and fights over political power. Finally, there is already a surprisingly large and diverse academic literature on Harry Potter.

Even after getting approval for the course, which was blessedly easy at my college, I still was not sure how exactly to organize it. The process was very different from the usual approach to using fiction, where a professor decides on issues to be addressed and then looks for appropriate readings. First I decided to root the course in ideas of political culture, believing that this would provide coherence and yet be a large enough base to cover the topics I envisioned. Second, I grouped the topics under three headings: identity, institutional behavior, and globalization. Finally, I planned that the reading for my weekly classes usually would combine theoretical pieces with a real-world case. I never assigned any readings from the Harry Potter books themselves, and the

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published course description noted that it would be assumed students had read all the books at least once. Class discussions and written assignments would tie together the theory, case, and Harry Potter. In this way, the Harry Potter books could be used to both illustrate and be illustrated by the political science material, while the real-world cases amplified and grounded these discussions. As I rarely specified on which sections of the books students should focus for any class, students were responsible for deciding how to tie the readings to the books. This enhanced class discussions as

as well as the bureaucratic manifestations of their ideas in *Deathly Hallows* (Rowlings 2007). Focusing on framing and resonance in social movements, I paired selections of McAdam's *Freedom Summer* (1990) with a discussion on the failure of Hermione to get her fellow students interested in elf welfare. All of my students recognized the difficulty in asking what the house elves really want and how we would know, although students differed on whether Ron was correct that the house elves were actually happy or whether they suffered from some sort of enslavement of the mind or a

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students applied material differently, but it very much limits the course to those students who already knew all seven Harry Potter books intimately; even at a small college, this limit did not prevent the course from filling immediately.

THE CLASS

Before the first day, I sent the registered students the syllabus so they would be prepared for the heavy reading load and the number of writing assignments (four four- to six-page papers plus a final research paper). While most readings would be articles or book chapters, I did order Neumann and Nexon's *Harry Potter and International Relations* (2006) for student purchase. For the first day, I thought it important to set the stage that it would be a different kind of political science class and yet it would be a serious political science class. To start, I had them gather in the hallway, calling them in one by one to pick their house assignment out of a "magical object" (for the rest of the semester, they did sit by house). In addition, I asked them to read the introduction of the Neumann and Nexon volume as well as two dense articles on political culture and cultural politics so we could address both the various ways political culture can be important and the methodological problems with studying political culture.

The course's first theme was identity. Reading constructivist, primordial, and psychological identity theories lead easily into discussions of the multiple fields of communal identity in the books (including blood purity, house identities, and the hierarchy of magical creatures), why and how these identities were important, and to what extent any of them were "natural." The debates were intense over such issues as whether brave students were placed in Gryffindor or whether students placed in Gryffindor became brave. Students seemed to grasp the intricacies of the different theoretical perspectives far easier than in my ethnic-conflict courses.

This was followed by weeks on identity and violence and identity and social movements. In reading about the Holocaust, particularly Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1995) and Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), the students saw the strong parallels with both the psychological profile of the Death Eaters

false consciousness as Hermione contended. Furthermore, while Hermione's low-risk quest seemed plausible, students were at a loss to understand why young people would have risked their lives in Mississippi in 1964. It is not that the students did not care about discrimination, but even the most passionate about social issues admitted they are far more likely to join a Facebook group, help a video go viral, or change their buying patterns than to actually go out into the streets, which in turn may make us consider the future of social movements as currently studied. Discussions during these weeks also spilled over into other contemporary issues, including the renewed appearance of strong anti-immigrant rhetoric, fear of Muslims, and the current contours of racial politics in America.

While the first part of the course fell neatly together, organizing the rest of the course proved more challenging. In the middle section, I wanted to focus on how governments operate, including everything from Weberian ideals to torture debates to the role of the media. The problem was dividing the material between class days, coherently ordering it, and not overlapping with the final segment on globalization, particularly because both sections would straddle international relations and comparative politics. As a way to separate the sections, I decided that I would relate the classes in the middle part to Iraq and the war on terror, especially as these connections are clear in the books written after 9/11. To kick off this section, the class read selections from Weber on ideal bureaucracies and articles on dysfunctional bureaucracies. This was used as a basis for comparing selections from Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (2006) on the infighting between the White House, Pentagon, and State Department over Iraq policy in 2003 and the Ministry of Magic's "half-crazed bureaucracy" (Barton 2006).

I followed this with terrorism and counterterrorism. In the Harry Potter books, terrorism is used both to sow fear and to throw the government into disarray, making it easier to take over. The debate over unforgivable curses covers both morality and effectiveness, echoing very real questions about torture. However, when some "good" characters use unforgivable curses, it severely complicates the matter. Similarly, the trials of the Death Eaters are deeply flawed because of issues of evidence and access to lawyers,

looking very much like Guantanamo trials, but are almost impossible to conduct in accordance within strict notions of fairness. This was by far the most intense discussion in the course.

For the second two classes of this section, one was devoted to media and politics while the other was devoted to an in-class activity. One important subplot in the Harry Potter books involves the role of reporter Rita Skeeter, who clearly shapes public perceptions on several issues and has close links to the government, and how the Quibbler becomes an important alternate news source. While the books acknowledge the incredible importance of information control, Rowlings never takes a clear stand on whether the media has some higher public purpose or whether it is just an object over which various political and economic interests compete. In watching the film *Control Room* and reading about the rise of Fox News, my students seemed deeply conflicted over media as a business and the realization that they themselves had no idea what to believe about anything. I decided to wrap up this section by having each house meet to identify key problems of governance in the wizarding world and propose solutions. In asking them to wrestle with issues of institutional design, discrimination, lustration, and other problems, the activity served not only to reinforce earlier discussions, but also to have them think creatively about the possibilities and tradeoffs in addressing them.

While supplemented with other articles, the last four classes on globalization were built around the Neuman and Nexon volume. Although I found the constructivist critiques fascinating, my students were more enthralled by the chapters on globalization of culture. What is so good about this volume is not just how the chapters discuss the processes of globalization, encompassing everything from books to sports, and reactions to this “McWorld,” but how these processes are so much more complicated than the standard stories of globalization. What does it mean that translations alter names, the rules of quidditch, and other aspects of the books to make them more culturally resonant? Why are the books seen as feminist in Turkey and anti-feminist in Sweden? Who embraces and who opposes the books in different countries and why? These questions become even more significant when examining the rise of global media corporations and the increasing trade in cultural products, both legally and illegally. When discussing the importance of intellectual property-rights protection in trade regimes, I discovered my students have very strong feelings on what is right and what is wrong in terms of downloading and sharing copyrighted material, although these feelings were disconnected from the actual laws.

EVALUATION

In teaching a new class, there are always surprises in what works and what does not. In addition to the usual course evaluation, at the end of the semester, I asked each student to write an extensive evaluation on the topics, reading, and organization. Nor surprisingly, overall the reactions to the readings and topics were very positive. Students also admitted that the writing assignments made them far better prepared for class. Students felt that the first section on identity and the weeks on terrorism and the media were particularly strong, although there was a sense that the last section on globalization was more uneven. I think this was partly due to my own inability to find texts that paired well with the political sciences ideas and the Harry Potter books. In addition, the second part of the course drew more heavily from the aca-

demic literature on Harry Potter, which was a mixed bag. While some of pieces sparked wide-ranging discussions, particularly many chapters in Neuman and Nexon, other readings often closed down discussion by covering everything that might have been said in class. In this respect, having students tie real-world cases and theoretical literature to Harry Potter was generally a more valuable teaching experience than having students reading someone else doing it.

Although we studied fewer topics than I do in my general comparative politics or international relations classes, I did feel that students had much deeper, more nuanced understanding of the issues that were covered. The only exception was on globalization, which is the other reason why I think this section was less successful than the others. For example, when addressing opposition to the books because of their symbolism as carriers of Western values or for religious reasons, many had trouble reacting to these objections with anything more profound than, “Well that’s dumb.” Because students came into the course with the firm belief that the books were incredible and taught valuable lessons about tolerance, most seemed to believe the world would be a better place if every child read all seven Harry Potter books and simply could not conceive of anyone not agreeing. Using the books to teach about globalization is also made difficult by the underdevelopment of international issues in the books themselves. Students from France and quidditch teams from Ireland appear in the books as do individual wizards from across the globe, but a few international organizations are only mentioned in passing and there is oddly never any real international dimension to the fight against Voldemort.

The other minor criticism was about dividing students into houses. My plan was to try to recreate the house identities, including camaraderie and competition, that are in the books, but there did not seem to be a practical way to do this. Constantly keeping track of house points seemed too much trouble. Initially I planned a quidditch competition using Middlebury rules, but I was more excited about this than any of my students. Over time examples of house identification appeared in the classroom; for example, students assigned to Slytherin were more likely to defend the Slytherin students in the books. Still, I think having the houses adds to the course, and next time I will think more creatively about how to use them.

In teaching such a course, it is also important to say something about the students. Despite the stress of putting it together, the students did make it a joy to teach. However, one must be prepared for the range of students. In my class, one student reads the books obsessively and had an encyclopedic knowledge far greater than mine. One was a Harry Potter fundamentalist who became very agitated if anyone criticized any part of the books or pointed out inconsistencies between books. And one nearly failed because he had only watched the five movies and tried to fake that he had read all seven books. Most, though, were there because they liked Harry Potter and were interested in political science.

In closing, while many of my colleagues at other schools have expressed their jealousy, telling me their departments would never allow them to teach such a course, I think we are doing ourselves and our students a disservice by not thinking more about these connections between political science and popular culture. The Neumann and Nexon volume certainly makes a compelling argument for the future study of this connection, particularly the ways in which popular culture can be used as data and the ways

it impacts politics. Popular culture also is a natural jumping off point for teaching many aspects of political culture. And as my students now receive most their news from *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* and for them the line between politics, entertainment, and social networking has almost faded into oblivion (as seems to be increasingly true for politicians as well), popular culture will inevitably be a more important field for research and a platform for teaching. ■

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